



# Foundation Document Overview

## Fort Washington Park

### Maryland



#### Contact Information

For more information about the *Fort Washington Park Foundation Document*, contact: [pisc\\_superintendent@nps.gov](mailto:pisc_superintendent@nps.gov) or (301) 839-1176 or write to: Oxon Cove Park, 6411 Oxon Hill Road, Oxon Hill, MD 20745

## Purpose



*The purpose of FORT WASHINGTON PARK is to preserve and interpret a key historic river defense of Washington, DC, while protecting the scenic and recreational opportunities of the Potomac River as part of a comprehensive system of parks established to preserve forests and provide protection of source water in and around the nation's capital.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why Fort Washington Park resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Fort Washington is the only pre-Civil War permanent masonry fortification on the Potomac River, constructed to guard and defend this strategic gateway to the nation's capital.
- Fort Washington's occupation and use by the United States military for more than 130 years illustrates the advances in coastal defenses and weaponry between the 19th and 20th centuries.
- The Battery Decatur, completed in 1896, was one of the first Endicott period masonry batteries ever built.
- Situated high atop a peninsula on the Potomac River, the sightlines that made Fort Washington a strategically important defensive position now provide exceptional views of the Potomac River and the nation's capital.
- Fort Washington preserves natural features, plant communities, and biodiversity that support the quality and ecological function of the region's natural resources. The park also protects the Potomac River watershed and preserves forests and natural scenery in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area, while providing a tranquil natural setting that allows visitors opportunities for personal contemplation and rejuvenation.





## Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Historic Fortifications**
- **Views and Vistas**
- **Archeological Resources**
- **Natural Communities**
- **Recreational Opportunities**



## Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The evolution of Fort Washington represents changes in both defensive and offensive military strategies and technologies used in defense of the nation and the security of Washington, DC.
- Originally built to defend the waterway to the nation's capital, Fort Washington Park is now charged with protecting natural communities and green space, rare within the vast metropolitan area of Washington, DC.
- Overlooking the Potomac River, the location that once made Fort Washington an ideal defensive position, now provides access to a wide range of opportunities for recreation, relaxation, and renewal.
- Fort Washington Park was established as a corridor of forest and natural scenery as part of a comprehensive system of parks for recreation, preservation of substantial tracts of forests, and protection of source water in and around the nation's capital.



## Description

Fort Washington Park was established by Congress on May 29, 1930, through Public Law 71-284, the Capper-Cramton Act. For more than 200 years, Fort Washington Park has been under the jurisdiction of the federal government, serving as a defensive outpost for Washington, DC, a training facility for military and civilian forces, and as a provider of inspirational, educational, and recreational opportunities for thousands of visitors annually.

In 1793, President Washington first proposed construction of the original fort, Fort Warburton. Having frequently crossed between Mount Vernon and the ferry at Warburton Manor, Washington recognized that the heights above the confluence of the Potomac River and Piscataway Creek were the best strategic spot to defend the future national capital from the river approach. Fort Warburton was constructed from 1808 to 1809, and it guarded the nation's capital until 1814, when it was destroyed by American soldiers in anticipation of a British attack during the War of 1812.

The present Fort Washington was constructed on the site between 1814 and 1824, and the first guns were mounted in 1846. With the exception of a few guns at the Washington Arsenal, Fort Washington was the only major coastal defense for the nation's capital until the Civil War.

In 1886, the War Department authorized a new defense system, consisting of rifled steel guns in concrete emplacement, to be installed at Fort Washington. In 1892, ground was broken for Battery B, later named Battery Decatur, and the guns were mounted in 1896. Eventually eight concrete batteries at Fort Washington and four at Fort Hunt, across the river in Virginia, made up the Potomac Defense Command. During World War I, the post was used as a staging area for troops being sent to France. After the war, the 3rd Battalion 12th Infantry moved in and became the ceremonial unit for the Military District of Washington.

In 1939, the post was abandoned and turned over to the Director of Public Buildings for use as a terminal point for the Maryland side of the George Washington Memorial Parkway. Before the transfer was complete, the United States entered World War II. Fort Washington was returned to the U.S. Army and became the home of the Adjutant General's School. After the war, the Veterans Administration managed the post hospital and other government agencies occupied some of the buildings. In 1946, Fort Washington was turned over to the Department of the Interior.

Today, the 341-acre park serves as a premiere historical and recreational area. The grounds feature the historic fort, hiking and biking paths, Potomac River access, and a view of the river that provides a scenic place for picnicking and fishing in a historic setting.

